



How exercise therapy helps to heal soft- tissue injuries

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Therapy & Rehab

If you've ever sprained your ankle, suffered from "tennis elbow" or thrown out your back while shoveling snow, you've experienced a soft-tissue injury. These injuries affect the body's tendons, ligaments and muscles.

Soft-tissue injuries are either acute (the result of sudden trauma) or caused by overuse (wear and tear). Acute injuries include sprains (ligaments), strains (tendons and muscles) and tearing (any of the three). These injuries can happen if someone falls, twists a body part, or receives a blow to the body (for example, in a car accident or while playing sports). Overuse injuries are caused by repetitive motion and chronic stress of the tissues. Examples include bursitis and tendinitis, which cause painful inflammation.

The symptoms of soft-tissue injuries include pain, swelling, stiffness and bruising. Immediate treatment typically involves rest, ice, compression and elevation (RICE), and anti-inflammatory medication, which help to reduce symptoms right after the injury. Mild injuries may feel better within a week, while severe injuries can persist for weeks or months. Torn muscles, ligaments or tendons may require surgery and extensive rehabilitation.

How quickly people heal from a soft-tissue injury depends on a number of factors, including their age and overall health, as well as the type of injury and how it is treated. However, perhaps the most important factor is how quickly the appropriate rehabilitation is received.

What many people don't consider is that soft-tissue injuries can linger, cause ongoing weakness and immobility, and present a high risk of re-injury if not rehabilitated functionally. Far too often, an injury such as a sprained ankle is rested, iced and taped until the pain alleviates, and the individual returns to work, play or recreation activities. However, without exercise therapy to retrain the ligaments, tendons and/or muscles that have been stretched, injured or damaged, these tissues are vulnerable to re-injury, and symptoms may linger unnecessarily.

Taking an active approach

An individual who has suffered a soft-tissue injury can seek help from different health professionals, depending on the nature of the injury. An individual who has suffered a soft-tissue injury can seek help from different health professionals, depending on

the nature of the injury. The treatment team could include a kinesiologist, a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, a registered massage therapist and/or a clinical counsellor, each one specializing in a different aspect of rehabilitation therapy.

You may be familiar with passive treatments, in which a therapist performs hands-on manual therapy on an injured area of the body. In recent years, a more active form of therapy has also gained traction among rehabilitation professionals. “There’s been more and more research to show that when the injured person is actively moving their own body and performing different movements, or mobilizations, under the guidance of a therapist, the body adapts much more quickly,” says Balraj Dhillon, a kinesiologist at Bayshore Therapy & Rehab, a division of Bayshore HealthCare, in Langley, B.C.

This active rehabilitation approach offers longer-lasting results than other methods alone, Dhillon adds. A person suffering from neck pain might get massage therapy – but the relief tends to be short-lived. “Pretty soon, the injured tissues are going to revert to their old state, and the pain is going to return. That’s why people typically go back to a massage therapist or chiropractor again and again,” he says.

At Bayshore Therapy & Rehab, Dhillon and his colleagues have found that when patients take an active role in their rehabilitation, they recover faster and their chances of reinjury are lower. “Often, people feel pain not because there’s an injury in a certain area, but because of a problem in the surrounding soft tissues,” says Dhillon. “They have issues that can only be addressed through exercise and activation.”

What to expect at a clinic visit

When Dhillon sees a patient for the first time, he conducts a biomechanical assessment. “I look at how the person moves when performing basic movement patterns done in everyday life, such as reaching with both arms, bending the knees and hips, and moving the spine,” he says. “I watch which muscles are flaring up with the movement, and which ones aren’t moving. Maybe muscle A should be working but it’s not, and muscle B is working but it shouldn’t be. Often, that’s why pain and symptoms occur.”

Once the assessment is done, Dhillon has all the information he needs to create a customized treatment program. “The goal is to activate the appropriate muscles and deactivate the ones being overworked. That will allow the body to move properly and more efficiently,” he says.

Appointments are typically an hour long and consist of stretching and exercises, performed by the patient with guidance from the therapist. The therapist may provide hands-on assistance, including soft-tissue and massage release techniques, but the emphasis is on the patient’s active movement, not passive therapy.

Patients receive a program of stretches, exercises and muscle release techniques to continue doing at home between weekly sessions. The therapist updates the treatment plan as the patient’s condition progressively improves.

Bayshore Therapy & Rehab provides comprehensive assessment and treatment services for automobile insurers, workplace insurers, life and health insurers, and government-funded ministries across Canada.

For more information about our Langley clinic, please call 604-404-0617.

To find out more,
contact Bayshore at
1.844.203.4534
rehab@bayshore.ca

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